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"The Peace that Failed"

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On June 28th of last year at the Palace of Versailles there was a commemoration that did not happen. There were no ceremonies marking the centennial of the Treaty of Versailles, which was signed on 28 June 1919. This non-event might seem unusual. That day in June witnessed a major event in the history of the world, the signing of the peace treaty that ended World War I. Actually, it was not unusual that there were no commemorative ceremonies for this treaty for a simple reason: few people, among the victors or the vanquished, have ever celebrated this treaty, which is almost universally acknowledged as "The Peace that Failed."[1]

In fact, "Versailles" has become a by-word for misguided and botched peace making. This dismissal goes back a long way, not quite to when the ink dried on the treaty, but almost. For example, George Orwell wrote in 1944: "In a shadowy way we have been told that that the Russian peace-terms are a super-Versailles, with partition of Germany, astronomical reparations, and forced labour on a huge scale." About the likely terms to end World War II, which was then still raging, Orwell added, "I don't know whether, when the time comes, the Russians will really want to put such terms into operation. My guess is they won't."[2]

Orwell was wrong. The Soviets, and also the other Allies, wanted such terms, and his words became an accurate capsule description of the World War II settlement. Harsh and vindictive as this later settlement was, it lasted. This was 'The Peace That Held.' As far as the Versailles settlement went, Orwell's comparison was unfair, and it raises the basic problem in viewing not only that settlement but all of World War I from the vantage point of a hundred years afterward.

This is the problem of perspective, which is true of all historical events. Those who come later know what the people back then could not know; they know how things turned out later. Specifically, for Versailles and World War I, they know that World War II and that "super-Versailles" came afterward and turned out differently. It is impossible not to view World War I through the lens of World War II, but that can lead to indulgence in the spurious certainties of hindsight. It is necessary to try to suspend such after-knowledge and look through the eyes of the people who lived through those events.

[1] Here I plead guilty to having pilfered a title. In 1949, Harper and Brothers published *The God that Failed* a collection of essays edited by the British scholar and Laborite politician. R.H.S. Crossman. The subject was Communism and the contributors recounted their disillusionment with this secular religion. The contributors included such English and notable European and English writers as Andre Gide, Ignaazio Silone, Arthur Koestler, and Stephen Spender, as well as two Americans, Richard Wright and Louis Fischer. Wright's identity as an African-American has tangential relevance to the last paragraph of this essay.

[2] "As I Please 40," 1 September 1944, in John Corey, ed. and intro, *Essays by George Orwell* (New York: Knopf, 2002), 733-734.

How did this peace settlement come about? Who did and did not do what?

Answering those questions requires starting with the conference, the peace that produced it, and the events preceding that conference, which did not itself take place at Versailles, just some subsidiary military talks. Only the signing of the treaty took place at Versailles, a point that needs to be revisited later. The main talks, the deliberations of the leaders—the "Big Four," Georges Clemenceau of France, David Lloyd George of Great Britain, Vittorio Orlando of Italy, and Woodrow Wilson of the United States—took place and the terms got hammered out in Paris. So, it is proper to refer to the "Paris peace conference."

The problems and, viewed in hindsight, the flaws of the settlement began with the way the war ended, with the Armistice, which had its centennial a year ago in November. The Germans sought an armistice, not from the Allies, but from President Wilson, and on the basis of his Fourteen Points, which none of the Allies had accepted. They had not rejected them, either; they had just held their tongues and kept their fingers crossed behind their backs. There then followed some hard negotiating, not so much with the Germans as with the Allies, who came up with lots of strings and reservations. Wilson's principal negotiator was his confidant Colonel Edward M. House, whom contemporaries called America's "best diplomatic brain" and "that devious son of a bitch."[3] The Armistice agreement showed both sides of House and was a masterpiece of creative misunderstandings. Clearly, this was not the best foot to get off on for a peace settlement, although it is hard to think of a much better example from other wars involving alliances.

One bad foot followed another with the actual Armistice terms signed at the famous Armistice Car at Compiègne. The site is worth visiting for what it tells about the Armistice. The most striking feature of the site is a large concrete sculpture with a legend that reads, "On this spot the armies of France humbled the brutal invaders." In the wagon itself the brass name plates show that on the Allied side there were only two representatives who were not French, a junior British admiral who was their liaison to the high command, headed by Marshal Ferdinand Foch, and his aide. There were no other Britons, no Empire representatives, no Americans, no Belgians, no Italians. Foch dictated draconian terms that required the Germans to disarm so thoroughly that they lost any ability to resume fighting. This was not an armistice, it was a surrender.

That was bad for several reasons. The main one was that it deprived Wilson of greater leverage over the Allies. The Armistice had given him his greatest diplomatic triumph, but it also sowed the seeds for his greatest diplomatic tragedy. The Armistice shortened the war by at least several months and avoided untold destruction, injury, and death. Allied war plans called for crossing the Rhine and an invasion of Germany in 1919. To imagine what that might have been like, look ahead twenty-five years at the last year of World War II.

Such a prolongation of this war would have made it look more like the next one. The long stalemate in the trenches had come to an end, and the war of movement had already gotten under way. The British had finally perfected the tank and developed aircraft with longer ranges and bigger bomb-carrying capacities. As horrific as World War I had been on the Western Front, it had been largely confined to limited, defined battlefields and had not leveled cities or wounded and killed many civilians. That was about to change. The world owed a great debt to Woodrow Wilson for sparing hundreds of thousands, possibly millions, of people such expanded carnage.

If the war had continued into 1919 with an invasion of Germany, it would also have looked like World War II in another way. The war plans called for the brunt of the fighting to be borne by the American Expeditionary Force, the AEF. British and French forces were severely depleted after four years of fighting. There were already two million Doughboys in France by the time of the Armistice, and as many as another two million were on the way. A victory in those circumstances would

[3] Harold Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), 16; Jonathan Daniels to John Milton Cooper, Jr., 6 September 1977, Jonathan Daniels Papers, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Nicolson also concedes that the Armistice agreements contained "fundamental misunderstanding." For a recent treatment of House, see Charles E. Neu, *Colonel House: A Biography of Woodrow Wilson's Silent Partner* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

have put President Wilson in the cat bird's seat for dictating the peace settlement. Instead, the British and French could correctly maintain that they had borne the brunt of the fighting and deserved the largest say in the settlement.

Having shortened the war and diminished its death and destruction, Wilson found himself in a far weaker position to shape the peace that followed.[4]

Argument over what the peacemakers did and did not do at Paris in 1919 has lasted for the century since then, and it shows no signs of resolution. Three main schools have emerged in these decades: one holds that the terms were too harsh; the second holds that they were too lenient; and the third holds that they were neither fish nor fowl.

The first school prevailed in the initial twenty years after the war. This is when "Versailles" became an epithet. That happened first in Germany, where the 'betrayals' of the conference became fodder for political discontent and a staple for Adolf Hitler and his Nazis. Similar sentiments soon cropped up among the victors, too. A steady stream of historical 'revisionism' undermined convictions about the justice of both the war and the peace. In the 1930s, as the international situation deteriorated and threats of war loomed again, such buyers' remorse fed appeasement in Britain and isolationism in the United States. Thousands of young Britons took the Oxford Oath that pledged them not to fight for king and country, and in 1937, on the twentieth anniversary of American entry into World War I, a Gallup poll found that seventy per cent of respondents thought that this had been a mistake.[5]

The second school came into its own during and soon after World War II. Despite a posthumous apotheosis of Wilson, influential commentators such as Walter Lippmann, George Kennan, and Hans Morgenthau espoused self-proclaimed 'realism.' They argued that Wilson and other idealists had fouled up the grounds for both going to war and making peace with their idealistic rhetoric and faith in their international peace-keeping organization, the League of Nations. It would have been a far, far better thing, they maintained, to have pursued national self-interest in a balance of power and to have ground down the international troublemakers, principally the Germans, to the point where they could have posed no further threats. Although these 'realists' had differences among themselves and could criticize policies after World War II, what prevailed after 1945 was their kind of settlement, and they took immense satisfaction in its evident staying power.[6]

The last school, 'neither fish nor foul,' was a variant within the realist-too-lenient school. In this view, the 1919 settlement was inconsistent, too harsh in some places and too lenient in others. On the one hand, it left Germany territorially intact and capable of resurgence, while on the other hand it inflicted many lesser injuries and added insults to those, particularly

[4] At the risk of immodesty, let me point out that this argument is also in John Milton Cooper, Jr., *Woodrow Wilson: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 452-53.

[5] For these views see Paul Birdsall, *Versailles: Twenty Years After* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1941), and Warren Cohen, *American Revisionists: Lessons of Intervention in World War I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

[6] The classic statements are Lippmann, *U. S. War Aims* (Boston: Little Brown, 1944), Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1947), and Kennan, *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951). For a recent expression of the realist viewpoint, see John Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Relations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018). Interestingly, Kennan later changed his mind about Wilson. See his reply to Thomas Knock's essay, "Wilson versus Kennan," in Cooper and Charles E. Neu, eds., *The Wilson Era: Essays in Honor of Arthur S. Link* (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, 1991).

the notorious "war guilt clause." The result was a mess, and may have been responsible for what happened twenty years later.[7]

What the three schools have in common is the same villain—Woodrow Wilson. In the eyes the first school, he promised a non-punitive peace based on the Fourteen Points and then agreed to harsh terms. For the second school, he spoiled the plans of the Allies, particularly the French, who wanted to eradicate the German menace once and for all. To the third school, his sins were the compound of his transgressions for the other two schools.

What should be made of these schools of criticism? First, it has to be conceded that each encapsulates a germ of truth. Wittingly or not, Wilson did raise expectations among not only the Germans but also among liberals and idealists in the victor nations that this would be a beneficent, forgiving settlement and would usher in an enduring era of peace and justice. At the conference, Wilson did agree to such measures as the war guilt clause, a big reparations bill, and ceding the German-speaking South Tyrol to Italy and the Chinese province of Shantung to Japan. Still, he held out against efforts to dismember Germany, stoutly resisted Italian designs on the Adriatic coast of the new nation of Yugoslavia, and rejected various moves to carve up the remnants of the Ottoman Empire like slices of pie. Given those apparently contradictory actions, it does seem appropriate to charge him with inconsistency and muddled thinking.

Yet consider also that Wilson prevented an outright grab for the German colonies by the Allies. Instead of simple cessions to the victors, those possessions became mandates under the League of Nations. Critics of the too-harsh school have pooh-poohed this as a fig leaf to cover up an imperialistic grab for spoils. But the mandatory powers did pledge to develop the infrastructure in those places and provide education, health facilities, and social services for their peoples. Moreover, they promised to prepare those peoples for eventual independence---something that almost no colonial power had ever done before. The great African-American thinker W. E. B. DuBois correctly perceived that this spelled the beginning of the end of white colonial rule.[8] Also, the often-lambasted break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire into smaller states really did move toward national "self-determination"---a phrase Wilson did not coin and did not include in the Fourteen Points.[9] The post-Versailles map of Central and Eastern Europe came closer to matching the linguistic distribution of peoples than any other map to that time.

Some critics have argued that Wilson made too many concessions to the Allies in order to get his cherished League of Nations, which he hailed as a panacea for future peace. Unlike the other criticisms, this one does not contain even a germ of truth. The only time Wilson gave up something for the sake of the League was when he let the Japanese retain their conquest of the former German concession in Shantung, which they promised would be temporary. In fact, the Japanese did evacuate Shantung in 1922. Nor did Wilson see the League as a panacea. Rather, he saw it as a living institution that would obligate all members, but especially the great powers that comprised the permanent members of the League Council, to maintain peace and punish would-be aggressors. He knew and admitted that international circumstances would change and that the League's actions must adapt to altered circumstances.

Contrary to many critics' charges, Wilson was not a structuralist. He did not view the League as a perfect instrument set in stone, and he welcomed ideas for changes and improvements. The reason that he dug in his heels during the debate at home over the treaty on Article X of the League Covenant, the collective security clause, was that he believed it to be what he called the 'heart' of the matter. It was the mutual pledge to conduct international relations in a way that might not

[7] For an early, gentle assertion of this view, see Thomas A. Bailey, *Woodrow Wilson and the Lost Peace* (New York, Macmillan, 1945).

[8] See David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. DuBois* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001).

[9] See Trygve Throntveit, "The Fable of the Fourteen Points: Woodrow Wilson and National Self-Determination," *Diplomatic History* 25:3 (June 2011): 45-81.

immediately eliminate war but would contain and mitigate it and eventually result in the growth of a non-belligerent world order. For him, the rest of it was details and applications, which would always be subject to change.

Why, then, did this become "The Peace That Failed"? Why is "Versailles" still a by-word for bad peacemaking? The answers do not lie in what Wilson and the other leaders did during those months in Paris. Again, look at where the Armistice was signed. A museum attached to the building that houses the railway car tells its story. This is not the original car, the one where Hitler made the French sign their capitulation in 1940. That car then traveled to Berlin, where it went on public display until the Allied bombing grew too threatening. It was then hidden in the Thuringian Forest until it was blown up when American forces approached in 1945. The present car is a replica, as is the huge sculpture, the original of which the Germans also blew up. Here was a tale of tit-for-tat revenge enacted over generations.

Nor did that tale end there in the Forest of Compeigne. It continued in the place that has become the by-word. Versailles was where the treaty was signed, in a special room and on a special table. The public ceremony of the signing took place in the Hall of Mirrors, and the treaty was signed on the table where Louis XIV met with his ministers. The symbolism was plain. This was the seat of the Sun King, who had laid waste to so much of Germany two centuries earlier. Almost fifty years earlier, the Germans had crowned the first monarch of their newly united empire in this same room, and shortly before that they had compelled the defeated French to sign the treaty that ended the Franco-Prussian War on that same table.

Such a spirit of revenge extending over decades, even centuries, did not bode well for this peace settlement. But did that spirit doom the settlement? How did it compare with the spirit that prevailed in 1945? That was not a time of atonement, forgiveness, and reconciliation, either; those things came later and not all that easily. The fundamental difference between these settlements was what came next. The latest and most careful student of the peacemaking in 1919, Margaret Macmillan, has concluded that what doomed this settlement was not what did or did not happen in Paris that year.[10] Rather, it was that the will to maintain it did not last. All the major nations on both sides sooner or later showed that they would not do what it took to keep this peace.

The United States led the way in reneging on any commitment to maintain this settlement. Despite a heroic effort by Wilson, which broke his health and blighted his presidency, America did not ratify the Treaty of Versailles and did not join the League of Nations. Later, under Wilson's Republican successor, there was a separate settlement with Germany, in a treaty that copied the Versailles treaty except for the Covenant of the League of Nations. Arguments still smolder about whether America's failure to join the League doomed the organization and led to World War II, but it did indisputably weaken the League and made that next war harder to prevent. The other victor nations also soon showed signs of welching on collective security, and in the early 1930s with the Japanese in Manchuria, the Italians in Ethiopia, and the Germans in the Rhineland, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, they showed that they had no stomach for action that might save the peace.

On the other side, the Germans had made "Versailles" worse than a by-word. It became a scapegoat for all their post-war ills, but it was just a scapegoat. The terms of the treaty were not really that onerous, especially the financial payments. They had lost little territory, and they got some back when the Saarland reverted to them. At bottom, what grieved the Germans was that they had lost the war, and they could not accept their defeat. This laid them open so such canards as Hitler's "stab in the back," with specific assassins to blame, such as Jews and socialists. How to get a nation and people to accept defeat short of near total annihilation remains the thorniest problem of peacemaking. Japan after 1945 offers a partial, but not complete, contrary example. The post-1919 era also witnessed dissatisfied victors such as Italy and Japan, which the rest of the major powers proved unwilling to restrain.

Why did what happened a quarter century after "The Peace That Failed" become "The Peace That Held"? A quick answer is to introduce two words—nuclear weapons. According to one view, these unprecedented weapons of mass destruction created a "balance of terror," with safety becoming what Prime Minister Winston Churchill in his last speech to Parliament

[10] Margaret Macmillan, *Paris 1919* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

called "the sturdy child of terror."[11] This argument has merit, but it does not offer a complete explanation for why this peace held. A further consideration is that the world had gotten a second lesson in how terrible conventional warfare had become. The major leaders on both sides for two decades after 1945 had been eyewitnesses to the destruction that had descended across Europe from the Seine to the Volga. For all his aggressive expansionism, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin remained restrained at crucial moments, and President Dwight Eisenhower openly recoiled at the prospect of a major war.

This may have been true in Japan as well. Some interpreters have maintained that the A-bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not terrorize the Japanese people into submission, because most of them did not know about those weapons. Rather, the bombs gave the Japanese rulers a face-saving way to surrender to the Americans alone, thereby sparing themselves a Soviet invasion, which seemed likely to occur much sooner than an American one.[12] Because Japan had not been at war with the Soviets until the time of the bombs, its diplomats had witnessed the carnage there and how the "liberation" of Eastern Europe was bringing Communist puppet governments in its wake. Really, the price of this Peace That Held was the Cold War. It was not always so cold, and it was often terrifying, but it did lend stability to much of the international system for nearly half a century.

The legacy of The Peace That Failed appears to be that nothing short of total, annihilating victory and a decades-long face-off between rival coalitions can forestall a general war. If so, that is a terrible lesson. Is there no alternative? Perhaps there is. Perhaps a modicum of restraint and a steady will to maintain a peace can insure that it lasts. Perhaps the most important fact about The Peace That Failed is not its immediate failure. Perhaps the effort to forge something approaching a non-punitive settlement, no matter how flawed, planted the seeds for something better to come.

There is a comparable case. These present years mark the sesquicentennial of Reconstruction, which has also to be viewed as an experiment that failed, at least in its own time. Only in recent decades has Reconstruction emerged from the denigration that too many in white America heaped upon it for too long. Only recently have Reconstruction's noble aims of racial justice and equality received their proper recognition and honor.[13] Perhaps the same recognition and honor should be accorded to The Peace That Failed, and Versailles, like Reconstruction, can no longer be a by-word.

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[11] Churchill speech, 1 March 1955, *Hansard*, 5th Series, Vol 537, cc 1893.

[12] This is a much-debated proposition. For a recent expression of this viewpoint, see Ward Wilson, "The Bomb Didn't Beat Japan . . . Stalin Did," *Foreign Policy*, 30 May 2013; https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/05/30/the-bomb-didnt-beat-japan-stalin-did/.

[13] On this point, see Eric Foner, *The Second Founding: How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019).